

Cultural Daily

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Girl Power: My Fair Lady, Dance Nation, Summer

David Sheward · Wednesday, May 30th, 2018

Alan Jay Lerner, the librettist and lyricist of *My Fair Lady*, once joked to Rex Harrison, the original Henry Higgins of that classic musical, that they both should have been gay because of their terrible history with women. Lerner had eight wives and Harrison six. Lerner's misogyny permeates *Lady* and Barlett Sher's new production for Lincoln Center attempts to counter it. This new version with its steely heroine is the latest in a trend of reshaping Golden Age tuners to address the #MeToo movement (Jack O'Brien's *Carousel* is another example).

The story of Eliza Doolittle, the bedraggled Cockney flower girl and Higgins, the haughty phonetics professor who transforms her into a lady by refining her speech, has captivated audiences since George Bernard Shaw first penned his *Pygmalion*. When there was talk of transforming the material into a musical, many teams balked at the notion. Shaw wrote the play as an anti-romance concerned with primarily with class distinction. The connection between Eliza and Higgins is intellectual and the missing love was a necessary ingredient in popular entertainment of midcentury Broadway. Lerner and Loewe solved the problem by uniting the unusual pair as the music swells at the final curtain. But along the path to reconciliation, Higgins expresses his contempt for the female sex in two numbers and Eliza is treated like an object, a live doll, a household drudge, and a pseudo-wife. Shaw has her stand up for herself and leave Higgins. Lerner had her coming back and smiling as Higgins relaxes and asks her to fetch his slippers—the very ones the girl had previously thrown at him in defiance.



Lauren Ambrose in *My Fair Lady*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

Spoiler Alert: Sher restores Shaw's dynamic with Eliza bravely exiting Higgins' house (elaborately designed by Michael Yeargan) like Nora in *A Doll's House*. But she also acknowledges their hidden emotions by tenderly stroking the cheek of a devastated rather than triumphant Higgins. Lauren Ambrose and Harry Hadden-Patton give this explosive reinterpretation reams of subtext as they do with the entire show which is as vital and fresh as Sher's previous retakes on such evergreens as *South Pacific*, *The King and I*, and *Fiddler on the Roof*. Christopher Gattelli's seamless choreography is all wild, drunken mayhem for the antics of Eliza's boisterous father Alfred (a winning and grizzled Norbert Leo Butz) and restrained precision during the elegant Embassy Waltz and buttoned-up Ascot race sequence (beautifully costumed as always by Catherine Zuber). Donald Holder's lighting places Yeargan's diverse settings in the proper time from a shabby dawn in Covenant Garden to bright sunlight at Ascot to a romantic evening at the embassy.

In addition to the indispensable Butz, girder-like support is provided by a sweet-voiced Jordan Donica as Freddy Enysford-Hill, Allan Corduner as a warm and perhaps closeted Col. Pickering, Linda Mugleston as the starchy housekeeper Mrs. Pearce, and the stylish Diana Rigg as Higgins' mother. Just beneath Rigg's spritely smile and dry delivery, you can detect a hint of devilish mischief not unlike that of Emma Peel, the leather-clad karate expert she immortalized on the 1960s adventure series *The Avengers*.

Of course the success of any production of this show depends on its stars and Ambrose and Hadden-Paton are worthy combatants in a Shavian battle of wills. Ambrose miraculously transforms from struggling urchin to confident courtier, navigating the confusing rules of etiquette, diction, and class, singing beautifully along the way. Watch as she finally enunciates the famous "Rain in Spain" like Helen Keller grasping speech for the first time. Harden-Patton's Higgins likewise undergoes a metamorphosis from arrogant language expert to bumbling victim of love. His precise delivery of Lerner and Loewe's patter songs is as expert as Harrison and he crumbles like a child bereft of a toy when Eliza is taken from him. This is a memorable match in a lovely and loving *Lady* for our age.



The company of *Dance Nation*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

Off-Broadway in the intimate Peter Jay Sharp Theater at Playwrights Horizons, Clare Barron's *Dance Nation* also concerns a male teacher figure clashing with female students. In this case, it's Dance Teacher Pat (a sternly serious Thomas Jay Ryan) mercilessly drilling his troupe of 13-year-old Ohio girls (and one boy) in quest of glory at the National Championships in Tampa Bay, Florida. But the adult teacher is not a primary figure in Barron's arresting and fragmentary script. The focus is on the girls as they deal with sexism and self-esteem. There is one undeniably talented star in troupe: Amina, but she downplays her abilities. Meanwhile, Dance Teacher Pat has chosen Zuzu, who burns to dance but lacks charisma, to take the lead in the group's latest competition piece, a pretentious meditation on the life of Gandhi. The tension between the two friends, the troupe, their teacher, and their moms (all played by the versatile Christina Rouner) is the stuff of Barron's drama. It sounds like a bad episode of *Dance Moms*, the reality-based TV series, but *Dance Nation* is an insightful portrait of the quest for female identity, incisively directed and choreographed by Lee Sunday Evans.

Played by actresses from their 20s to 50s, the young women reveal their inner fears and frustrations in a series of unexpected and penetrating monologues and scenes. Eboni Booth expertly captures Zuzu's tentative doubt and Dina Shihabi nails Amina's fire and the fear that keeps her from fanning it. Lucy Taylor delivers an incandescent speech on teen destiny while Ellen Maddow has a sweet and lilting fantasy on flying. Ikechukwu Ufomadu is a perfectly fumbling Luke, the sole male in the troupe. Purva Bedi and Camila Cano-Flavia complete this estimable ensemble.



Ariana DeBose (center) in *Summer: The Donna Summer Musical*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

Summer: The Donna Summer Musical clumsily attempts to make a similar statement on female empowerment, but the flimsy musical bio skims TV-movie clichés about the disco diva's life in between mostly uninspired renditions of her hits. Sexual abuse, male oppression in the music industry, growing up on the mean Boston streets, numerous love affairs, family, daughters, and

finally death from cancer—all flash by in the crowded book by Colman Domingo, Robert Cary and director Des McAnuff, whose staging is like a flashy Vegas concert. Only in “She Works Hard for the Money” does McAnuff’s direction, Sergio Trujillo’s slick choreography and the performance of Ariana DeBose, one of three actresses playing Summer, combine to create an exciting and powerful sequence moving the story forward and offering commentary on the subject’s trials. Otherwise this is cold, fast *Summer*.

My Fair Lady: April 19—Jan. 6, 2019. Lincoln Center Theater at the Vivian Beaumont Theater, 150 W. 65th St., NYC. Tue 7pm, Wed 2pm & 8pm, Thu 7pm, Fri 8pm, Sat, 2pm & 8pm, Sun 3pm. Running time: three hours including intermission. \$97—\$199. (212) 239-6200. www.telecharge.com.

Dance Nation: May 8—July 1. Peter Jay Sharp Theater at Playwrights Horizons, 416 W. 42nd St., NYC. Tue—Fri 7:30pm, Sat 2pm & 7:30pm, Sun 2pm & 7pm. Running time: one hour and 40 mins. with no intermission. \$59—\$99. (212) 279-4200. www.ticketcentral.com.

Summer: The Donna Summer Musical: Opened April 23 for an open run. Lunt-Fontanne Theatre, 205 W. 46th St., NYC. Tue 7pm, Wed 2pm & 7pm, Thu 7pm, Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 3pm. Running time: one hour and 30 mins. with no intermission. \$48—\$149. (800) 745-3000. www.ticketmaster.com.

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